



Glen Carbon Local Among Four American Connection Corps Fellows Placed In Illinois By Lead For America, Heartland Forward

August 4 2021 9:41 AM



CHICAGO – Lead for America (LFA) and Heartland Forward today announced the placement of four American Connection Corps (ACC) Fellows in Illinois.

These fellows will work to increase broadband access and digital literacy and contribute to critical community development initiatives in the Chicagoland area, Metro East, Quad Cities and Greater Peoria. The Illinois Fellows are part of the ACC inaugural class that includes 50 individuals to serve as community leaders across the country. As part of the national network, ACC Fellows will have access to premiere national training on community organizing, broadband and digital inclusion, and a network of LFA leaders nationwide.

The [American Connection Corps](#) is a new, innovative fellowship program focused on bridging the digital divide, led by Land O’Lakes, Inc. and LFA with funding and support from Heartland Forward for the efforts in Arkansas, Illinois, Ohio and Tennessee. Additional support for the program in Illinois is being provided by Ariel Investments, University of Illinois Extension, the Farm Bureau, CHS, Scoular, Midwest Dairy and Mayo Clinic.

“Lead For America is on a mission to build a generation of civic leaders dedicated to tackling the toughest challenges facing the communities they call home—and we are excited to bring our Hometown Fellowship model to communities across Illinois, from Peoria to Mercer counties, this year,” said Joe Nail, CEO and co-founder of Lead For America. “The coronavirus pandemic underscored the importance of both leadership, and of closing the digital divide in rural and urban communities across America. We are honored to partner with Land O’Lakes and the other American Connection Corps partners in placing 50 dynamic, and locally rooted leaders in the communities and places that helped raise them. We are committed to ensuring this initiative becomes a pathway home for outstanding Illinoisans for many years to come.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic showed us just how critical digital access is in our day-to-day lives, with people depending on the internet for school, work, healthcare and more,” said Angie Cooper, chief program officer for Heartland Forward. “Heartland Forward is thrilled to be working with Lead For America and our local partners to place four fellows who will help advance the great work on the ground in Illinois. We’re optimistic about the progress they’ll make in closing the digital divide in the communities they serve and the advocates they’ll become to scale success elsewhere.”

Three of the American Connection Corps host organizations in Illinois have been recipients of Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) grants to support their broadband access and digital equity work: Greater Peoria

Economic Development Council, Mercer County Better Together and Leadership Council of Southwestern Illinois. A fourth, PCs for People, is collaborating with the State of Illinois on a statewide Computer Equity Network program.

“In communities across Illinois and around the nation, access to high-speed internet is essential for success in today’s 21st century economy. Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, the State is investing in Connect Illinois to spearhead capital improvements and robust community planning that will improve access for all of our residents – work that could not be done without the support of many partners at the state, federal and grassroots levels,” said DCEO acting director Sylvia Garcia. “The American Connection Corps fellowship program serves as an innovative approach to connect efforts at the local level as we work to close the digital divide once and for all.”

“I firmly believe there is a role for leaders at every level to be actively engaged in bridging the access gap to critical digital infrastructure and leveraging economic opportunities for the very communities they grew up in,” said Tina May, Land O’Lakes, Inc. vice president for Rural Services. “And, this is just the beginning – it is our intention that this program will both grow to make an immediate and significant impact and also prove to legislators at the state and federal level that there is a scalable, successful model for community development, which can ensure all Americans have access to this fundamental infrastructure.”

ACC Fellows will serve their home communities in locations nationwide through high-impact, high-urgency two-year placements focused on closing the digital divide and building the next generation of leaders. They will tackle tough challenges that stand in the way of internet access in the communities they serve, strengthen the local civic infrastructure and join a new generation of transformational community leaders. Fellows will also participate in LFA's national Changemaker Summit, attend quarterly retreats, receive 1:1 expert mentorship, and join a growing community of local leaders.

The inaugural ACC hosts and fellows in Illinois are:

- PCs for People, Chicagoland
- Nathan Palmer: Nathan is a graduate of Western Illinois University and helped co-found History Never Taught, which helps people in need through toy, food, clothes and book drives and other donation events. With PCs for People, he will promote broadband adoption across Cook County and northern Illinois through partnership development and community outreach coordination. Nathan will also help support local community broadband adoption efforts through consultation with Illinois Connected Communities grant recipients.

- Leadership Council of Southwestern Illinois, Glen Carbon
- Mary Gay: Mary is a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis, where she worked with the community group Just Moms STL to provide support for community brownfield cleanup and was co-president of LIVE, a group dedicated to educating the campus on interpersonal violence and healthy relationships. In her role as a Fellow, Mary will assist in the implementation of the Illinois Connected Communities Strategic Plan Key Regional Priorities for the nine-county region. She will spearhead the development of a broadband grant “war room” and assist in legislative activities to drive enhanced internet access and adoption.
- Mercer County Better Together, Mercer County
- Esther Durosini: A Loyola University Chicago graduate, Esther has spent time serving as a legislative intern in the United State Senate, conducting policy research and assisting with constituent case management for Illinoisans. With Mercer County Better Together, Esther will serve as a Broadband Coordinator to help fortify broadband services across the county, and develop an interactive map to highlight gaps and expansion opportunities for broadband development.
- Greater Peoria Economic Development Council, Peoria
- Grace Clucas: Grace is a 2021 graduate from Saint Mary’s College, where she double majored in political science and history and was an active leader in student groups on campus including Student Government and Model UN. In her role as a Fellow, Grace will provide digital navigation and technical literacy to support the community in tandem with local partner organizations and conduct outreach to local educational institutions to help them take advantage of the Emergency Connectivity Fund.

“Digital inclusion efforts such as PCs for People’s work in Illinois and nationwide are essential in today’s society, where it is increasingly hard to access education, healthcare or employment opportunities without access to a computer and the internet,” said PCs for People CEO Casey Sorensen. “We look forward to partnering with the American Connection Corps to have Nathan join our team working to bridge the digital divide in Chicago and beyond.”

“The Leadership Council SWIL is proud to partner with Lead For America in hosting Mary Gay, Lead For America Fellow, to assist in the Southwestern Illinois Connected Communities Broadband strategic plan rollout,” said Ronda Sauget, Executive Director and CEO of the Leadership Council SWIL. “Specifically, this partnership will enable our nine county region to develop broadband grants and resources that will be shared

with others, thus encouraging more participation and expansion of broadband access, adoption, and use throughout our communities. We are honored to work with such a prestigious organization to help bridge the digital divide in Illinois!"

"Mercer County Better Together (MCBT) has spent the past year building capacity and mapping ways to strengthen the local broadband landscape," said MCBT Executive Director Kyle McEwen. "The American Connection Corps Fellowship is a culmination of this work. We're thrilled to have Esther join our team to help bring the Mercer County Strategic Broadband Plan to life."

"The Greater Peoria Economic Development Council (GPEDC) views the expansion of broadband access, affordability, and utilization as integral to our development strategy," said Casey Peterson, Director of Rural Outreach and Development at Greater Peoria EDC. "With the addition of Grace to our team, we will be able to drastically expand our broadband development and digital inclusion efforts in the five counties we serve. The GPEDC is excited to be among the first organizations to host an American Connection Corp fellow."

Heartland Forward's participation in the ACC is part of its three-year Connecting the Heartland initiative focused on ensuring families and businesses across America's heartland have access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet service. They are partnering with LFA to support Fellows in Arkansas, Illinois, Ohio and Tennessee.

For general information on the ACC, please visit: <https://www.lead4america.org/american-connection-corps>

About Lead for America

Lead For America (LFA) is a national nonprofit that helps outstanding young people become civic leaders. LFA seeks to direct homegrown talent where it's needed most — in towns and counties where challenges outpace resources available — often in rural and under-resourced communities. Through their flagship two-year paid Fellows program, LFA has funded and placed over 100 Fellows in over 80 communities and 30 states in newly created positions in their home communities since 2019, and plan to have 100 additional Fellows starting in 2021. Combined, LFA Fellows have leveraged more than \$17 million for their communities and impacted the lives of more than 13.5 million people. Lead For America's national headquarters is located in Dodge City, Kansas.

About Heartland Forward:

Heartland Forward is a nonpartisan, 501c3 organization whose mission is to improve economic performance in the center of the United States by advocating for fact-based solutions to foster job creation, knowledge-based and inclusive growth and improved health outcomes. Heartland Forward conducts independent, data-driven research and programs to facilitate action-oriented discussion and impactful policy recommendations. To learn more, visit <https://heartlandforward.org/>.

About Land O'Lakes, Inc.

Land O'Lakes, Inc., one of America's premier agribusiness and food companies, is a member-owned cooperative with industry-leading operations that span the spectrum from agricultural production to consumer foods. With 2020 annual sales of \$14 billion, Land O'Lakes is one of the nation's largest cooperatives, ranking 219 on the Fortune 500. Building on a legacy of more than 99 years of operation, Land O'Lakes today operates some of the most respected brands in agribusiness and food production including Land O'Lakes Dairy Foods, Purina Animal Nutrition, WinField United and Truterra. The company does business in all 50 states and more than 60 countries. Land O'Lakes, Inc. corporate headquarters are located in Arden Hills, Minnesota.